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RUEHBO/AMEMBASSY BOGOTA 5542
RUEHBR/AMEMBASSY BRASILIA 9481
RUEHBW/AMEMBASSY BUENOS AIRES 6701
RUEHCV/AMEMBASSY CARACAS 3803
RUEHGE/AMEMBASSY GEORGETOWN 0769
RUEHPE/AMEMBASSY LIMA 4087
RUEHMD/AMEMBASSY MADRID 4131
RUEHMN/AMEMBASSY MONTEVIDEO 5639
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C O N F I D E N T I A L LA PAZ 001633

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/28/2018
TAGS: PGOV PREL BL
SUBJECT: BOLIVIA RECALL: TARIJA'S COSSIO MORE SECURE

REF: A. LA PAZ 1395
 1B. LA PAZ 1411
 1C. LA PAZ 1460

Classified By: A/EcoPol Chief Brian Quigley for reasons 1.4 (b, d).

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Summary
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11. (C) In the weeks leading up to the June 22 autonomy vote, the prefect (governor) in Bolivia's gas rich southern state of Tarija, Mario Cossio, looked vulnerable to be recalled in the August 10 vote. However, the overwhelming passage of autonomy, combined with Cossio's efforts to blunt past criticisms and corruption charges, have prefectoral authorities more confident that Cossio now will retain the state's top post. End Summary.

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The Specter
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12. (C) In early June, political figures in Tarija were pessimistic that Prefect Mario Cossio would survive an August 10 recall vote (Ref a). Movement Towards Socialism (MAS) charges of corruption were sticking and a lack of effort to share power and consult with other political figures in the department had eroded his support base. As a result, it looked like a wealthy state with an approved autonomy referendum might be governed by a prefect hand-picked by Evo Morales. Popular pressure may demand a vote for a new prefect if Cossio were to lose, but there is no guarantee the Morales administration will allow one. There is no defined period within which states must hold elections for a new prefect if the sitting prefect is recalled.

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A Likely Victory
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13. (C) The hand-wringing of early June has been replaced by cautious optimism in the prefect's office. Cossio needs 54 percent of the vote to remain in office. (Note: The skewed

rules of the recall referendum dictate that voters casting a "no" vote, i.e. a vote to recall, need only surpass the total percentage (and number) of votes cast in favor of the candidate when he was elected. In Cossio's case, he was elected with 46 percent of the vote. End note.) While polls indicate that Cossio would currently receive just enough votes to survive, the prefect's Foreign Relations Advisor, Hugo Carvajal is now confident that Cossio's popularity (which separately polls at close to 70 percent) will carry him through the recall referendum.

¶4. (C) Carvajal explained to us that Cossio has taken concrete steps to neutralize the MAS campaign against him. The largest scandal revolving around Cossio is that a company associated with his brother received a lucrative contract for road construction. Cossio recently rescinded the contract and will now have the prefecture carry out the construction in-house. Cossio was also criticized for the size of a new house he had constructed, but rather than move in and celebrate the occasion with a large party, the house has been discreetly sold. Finally, Carvajal says that the prefect is now reaching out to Tarija city's mayor, and is working on building a more solid regional base.

¶5. (C) Arturo Lema, the ex Secretary General of Tarija, explains the situation facing voters as choosing between a corrupt politician who represents change (i.e. autonomy) or voting for the old model of centralized control in La Paz. For Lema, it is a difficult choice for many voters. However, following the overwhelming victory of autonomy, it is one that will likely favor Cossio. Carvajal also could not emphasize this enough. He said that autonomy's victory by some 80 percent of the voters pushed Cossio to the decision to openly participate and support the recall referendum process. Moreover, Carvajal said that ironically it was the botched dynamiting of a local media affiliate by a member of the presidential guard in a car rented by the Venezuelan Embassy (Ref. b and c) that solidified Tarija voters behind autonomy and, to a lesser extent, Cossio.

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